

MY CONGREGATION AS AN EMOTIONAL SYSTEM

Churches are supposed to be holy places; where God is worshipped in splendour, in an atmosphere of love and fellowship. We expect our clergy to be paragons of virtue - wise, kind, gentle, enthusiastic and motivating; and our fellow parishioners to be warm, welcoming, and sympathetic. The experience, however, is often significantly different. Congregations can be cold and distant. There may be factions and rifts, bitterness, anger, even deception, coercion, and rejection. We do not expect what is holy, set aside for God's purposes, to be so ordinary and subject to human failings. For some of us, this discovery comes as a rude awakening.

According to Peter Steinke, in his book *"How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems"*, our disillusionment results from a failure to realize that the church functions as an emotional system.¹ There are positive aspects – joy, comfort, support, cooperation and friendship. There is also a downside. Emotional systems are inherently anxious. Intense anxiety distracts a congregation from its purpose, sets people at odds with each other, and builds walls against outsiders.² It should come as no surprise that this should be the case; after all disagreement was present in the church from the very beginning - "There arose a reasoning among them which of them should be the greatest" (Luke 9:46). Steinke quotes the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who notes, "Thus at the very beginning of Christian fellowship there is engendered an invisible, often unconscious, life and death contest ... This is enough to destroy a fellowship."³

Steinke notes that our expectations of Christian community far exceed those for any other to which we belong. Yet, he maintains that despite the presence of the Holy Spirit and the power of forgiveness the presence of anxiety in the Church is a given. Ignoring it is foolishness, perhaps even a signal of "little faith".⁴ His premise is that we need to pay attention to and work through the presence of anxious forces in the church, rather than being surprised and rendered helpless by them, retreating from their distressing influence, or protecting those who spread the disease among others.⁵ As a way to think about and

¹ Peter L. Steinke, How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as emotional systems, (Bethesda: The Alban Institute, 2002), ix

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*, x, (quoting Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1954), 90)

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*, xi

work through these emotional processes, he borrows from “system theory”, specifically the family system, and adapts it to the study of the church congregation as an emotional unit.⁶

This paper will summarize Steinke’s concept of the church as an emotional system; and then attempt to apply his analytical tools to the congregation in which the writer is a member.

The Church as an Emotional System

Basically a system is a set of forces and events that interact. To think systematically is to look at the interrelatedness of the parts. Steinke notes that a group of people is different from the individual actions of the people combined - the whole is a force greater than any of its composing pieces.⁷ Moreover, when we think systematically, we cannot understand one part without the other. The relationship between A and B is not causal but co-causal”. A and B both influence and are influenced by each other. Every cause is an effect. Every effect is a cause.⁸

System theory focuses on how actions are mutually influenced; and how they become patterned or repeated. As an interaction is repeated it is reinforced, and before long the patterning itself regulates the life of its parts.⁹ When the system is subject to extremes, injury or malfunction established patterns – “homeostasis” - work to restore balance. In the church the stabilizing forces are traditions and rules. Although change is necessary for survival, balancing forces may keep in place, or in a narrow range of response, what needs to be modified.¹⁰ Although we are creatures of habit, situations change and we must negotiate new ways of living together.¹¹

System thinking instructs us to look at how the whole is wired together. In human systems the parts are organized into the whole through functioning positions. The arrangements are maintained by mutual functioning, but disturbed by new ways of behaving.

What most distinguish relationship systems are emotional processes, driven by and organized around two forces: the need to be separate, and the need to be close. The two are in tension; and as such are anxiety-producing.¹² Self-differentiation is the means of

⁶ Steinke, xi

⁷ *ibid*, 4

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ *ibid*, 6

¹⁰ *ibid*, 7

¹¹ *ibid*, 8-9

¹² *ibid*, 10

maintaining the two forces in balance: Self-differentiation means “being separate together” or “being connected selves”. It never happens in isolation. It requires other people.¹³

All relationship systems become anxious through the simple act of putting people together. Anxiety can be infectious. What triggers it is unique to each system, but common activators are significant changes and losses, which upset the stable patterns and balance of the system. Equally important is where anxiety is focused. Although anxiety is free-floating, it eventually settles somewhere. The most vulnerable or responsible people in the network are the usual targets.¹⁴ Anxiety most adversely affects those relationships with little capacity to tolerate or manage differences. It can also be our deliverance. It has motive power and provokes change. However if reaches certain intensity it prevents the very change it provokes.¹⁵

The church family is no stranger to anxiety. Wills conflict, camps form, the battle for the kitchen begins ... The emotional processes are perhaps more intense when what we are dealing with lies close to the heart and meaning of life. In fact, congregational skirmishes may be even more abusive than those taking place in less emotionally charged groups. However, we expect harmony to prevail in the church family.¹⁶

As an emotional system the church has its own drama. It has its distancers, the non-active, the quitters, and the fusers who consider the church to be their property. People act out their own unfinished agendas with other members of congregation. Some harangue others so don't have to change themselves. Some are forever cheating others of their birthright for their own special place in the 'family'. Others form a 'crankiness' crowd, looking for external conditions to explain their own unhappiness. Yet others are a 'sunshine' squad. Fearful of differences, they distract the family from the storm clouds.¹⁷

Common to many church families is unworked grief about the 'loss' of an endeared pastor. Regardless of the circumstances, if unresolved it turns into rejection of the new pastor, withdrawal, or attempts to 'fuse' with the new leader. Fusers failing to achieve their ends quit.¹⁸

Steinke notes that relationship systems are always unstable. Inevitably, the most anxious people in the system will bind their anxiety, and attempt to shift their burden

¹³ Steinke, 11

¹⁴ *ibid*, 13

¹⁵ *ibid*, 14

¹⁶ *ibid*, 25

¹⁷ *ibid*, 38

¹⁸ *ibid*, 39

elsewhere.¹⁹ The most common way to do so is through the emotional process of triangling. When A is at odds with B the most anxious of A and B introduces C (third party) to reduce anxiety between A and B.²⁰ Burden shifting is three sided; involving three people, two people and a mood, or two people and a substance. When someone shifts a burden another person or thing is placed in the outside position. Sometimes there is also an 'identified problem' in the 3rd position, resulting from anxiety in the church family concerning 'the budget', 'the bishop', 'the past', or some other issue.²¹ The prime targets for burden shifting are those in the responsible or vulnerable position. If a pastor occupies both, he or she may be mercilessly attacked. Steinke notes that a pastor in crisis jars the stability of the whole system.²²

Triangles oppose change, and maintain reactivity. Anxiety is passed around like the proverbial 'buck'. The System searches for a culprit instead of recognizing how anxiety is being reinforced. Individuals 'shift the burden' and become focused on weaknesses, diagnosis and troublemakers. The system is not interested in learning from its pain but just wants to escape. Scared stiff – it cannot be resourceful and flexible.²³

Steinke quotes Edwin Friedman's observation that "... religious institutions are the worst offenders at encouraging immaturity and irresponsibility."²⁴ Friedman goes on to say that In church after church some member is passively-aggressively holding the system hostage and no one wants to fire him or force him to leave because it wouldn't be the Christian thing to do. He contends that reactors - the least mature, least motivated, least self-regulating, but most recalcitrant people - command many church families. Others permit and tolerate the taking of hostages in the name of love. Steinke notes that reactors thrive when others are passive or permissive. The anxious reactivity of the 'hostage taker' is maintained by the sentimentality of the 'nice' people.²⁵ Sentimentalists don't realize reactors have 'holes in their buckets'. No matter how much ground you give it is to no advantage. More will be expected. Meanwhile, reactors are not held responsible for their actions and are shielded from challenge.²⁶

¹⁹ Steinke, 46

²⁰ *ibid*, 47

²¹ *ibid*, 49

²² *ibid*, 50

²³ *ibid*, 51-52

²⁴ *ibid*. 59

²⁵ *ibid*, 59

²⁶ *ibid*, 66

As long as triangles exist there is little chance of restoring balance. Triangles transmit anxiety and indicate that people are not managing their anxiety, and change is inhibited.²⁷ The participants react against each other rather than define themselves to one another, and enable the disease process through their own emotionality. Unable to manage anxiety they tighten the circle, lose perspective, and shift their anxious burden, all of which is malignant.²⁸

Anxiety is also evidenced by overfocus; a clear indication the anxiety is related to other relationships in the life of the complainer. When we are overfocused we close the space between ourselves and others. Deifying and crucifying are both overfocus. With both there is insufficient emotional distance. Pursuit behavior is any activity that overfocuses on another person. The most obvious form is rescue. Perhaps the most difficult form of pursuit behaviour to recognize is criticism. Whenever someone gets under our skin we are infected with anxiety. If the pursuer can't be close through play, ecstasy, touch and nurture, he or she gets close through angry outbursts, specious charges and harsh accusations.²⁹

Secrecy is anxious reactivity. Secrets produce more anxiety and generate triangles. It is secrecy itself – not the content of the secret – that is harmful. Secrets are a telltale characteristic of dysfunctional families.³⁰

Steinke notes that church families, like individuals, exhibit greater or lesser degrees of emotional maturity.³¹ Emotional maturity is a measure of how a system will react under threat. As the degree of emotional maturity increases there is a wider choice of responses available. Immature church families slide toward automatic and reactive behaviour. Preoccupied with getting beyond it all the church family operates for the short run.³² Immature behaviour is impatient, casts blame, uses either/or thinking and is shortsighted. It surrenders control to events.

In Steinke's analysis, the role of the leader is critical. The leader is the steward of the vision. It is his or her responsibility to articulate a picture of the future and give the group a direction and a destiny.³³ The leader's function is to affect the group so that their resources are energized and functions promoted. It is the leader who can most affect calm, focus and

²⁷ Steinke, 79

²⁸ *ibid*, 80

²⁹ *ibid*, 88

³⁰ *ibid*, 89-90

³¹ *ibid*, 94

³² *ibid*, 100

³³ *ibid*, 103

change.³⁴ The church leaders play a crucial role in maintaining the healthy functioning of the church family. Indeed, they are responsible for the “immune response” of the community.³⁵ Immature (hesitant and undifferentiated) leaders exhibit weak powers of discrimination, and make no response when a response is needed. Indeed, passive leaders encourage the anxiously reactive.

In troubled congregations, Steinke notes, two kinds of conditions generally. Precipitating conditions (external) may involve a Pastor’s departure after 15 years or more with a congregation, a sequence of pastor’s each averaging 3 to 5 years of service, or trauma (major shifts in people’s lives). Contributing conditions (internal) may exhibit poorly defined boundaries in the church family (responsibility, expectation, policy, decision-making), no clear vision, or emotionality (more intense or widespread).

Precipitating conditions resemble foreign invaders in our bodies. They stir up feelings of sorrow, helpless frustration and pressure which lower the responsiveness of the group. If contributing conditions exist, the capacity to respond is even more limited. Some congregations remain vulnerable to the precipitators. They experience cycles of strife. Contributing conditions are never modified. They continue to focus on external conditions to the exclusion of internal ones. They do not think systematically, their leaders are unresponsive, and perhaps frustrated and helpless.³⁶

Steinke also has witnessed a form of autoimmune disease in troubled churches, characterized by fierce overreaction. People are overfocused on one another. The group loses its integrity to its own reactivity – slander, blame, accusation, silent neglect and secret meetings. No one keeps focus on boundaries and vision, and objectivity is tossed to the winds of emotionality. These churches are in more danger from their immature leaders than from the contentious issues. If the leaders overreact, the church is bereft of its response mechanism. Indeed the leaders may participate in the group’s destruction by their own exaggerated and purposeless activity.³⁷

To promote a healthy church, leaders should focus on self, not others; strength, not weakness; process, not content; challenge, not comfort; integrity, not unity, system, not

³⁴ Steinke, 104

³⁵ *ibid*

³⁶ *ibid*, 107

³⁷ *ibid*, 108-109

symptom, and direction not condition. Being self-defined, they can be trusted with the community's definition of itself.³⁸

My Congregation as an Emotional System

My present congregation, which I will call St. Brigitte's (St. B's) for the purposes of this paper, is located in a major metropolitan area, close to a university and other cultural and academic institutions. It is a destination church, rather than one that serves the parish community. Given the unique nature of its liturgy and worship it attracts members from across the Metropolitan area. However, I believe there are less than 10 parishioners who actually live within its nominal parish boundaries.

Until recently St. B's was led by a long-term rector – over 20 years of service – who did a good job of holding together the several diverse groups within the congregation. Although the parish has a substantial endowment, the costs of maintaining its building and vestments have consumed the bulk of its attention. Indeed, without renting out the rectory, the parish is now operating at a deficit. This is causing some concern because the endowment funds cannot be encroached upon. Since there is some urgency about this matter, the new incumbent has focused his attention on a parish pledge campaign this fall, and set aside several other projects.

As a result of the church's financial position, there is no curate. However, there is a part-time assistant priest of some long standing, and several honorary associates with a particular love for the parish who assist in maintaining its full program of services and offices. Being an Anglo-Catholic parish, St. B's provides mass and performs both the morning and evening offices daily. On Sundays there are three morning services – two with choir, a said Matins, and a choral Evensong. There is a focus on beauty in the liturgy and the music that appeals to a highly literate and academic congregation. In order to support all of the above, there is very active participation in the Acolytes Guild and the Altar Guild. There are also a number of 'worship societies' active in the church, focusing on various aspects of catholic spirituality.

The several congregations are quite diverse. There is a strong contingent from the Prayer Book Society who attend the 8:00 a.m. Mass, the 11:00 o'clock Solemn Mass, and the Choral Evensong. The 9:30 service is uses the Book of Alternative Services and has

³⁸ *ibid*, 109

attracted a congregation who like Catholic worship within the context of a more inclusive, modern liturgy.

The four services share the common feature that there are few children present. Although the church does offer a Sunday School and Child Care, it is only at the 11:00 Solemn Mass; and is primarily used by choir members and members of the Acolyte's and Sidespersons Guilds. As a result it is quite small – generally less than 10 children. Some of the parents and teachers have expressed dissatisfaction with both the Sunday School format and program, which they did not feel is age appropriate, and which is based on the Book of Common Prayer. However, attempts to talk about change have met with strong opposition from the Church School Superintendent, a member of the Prayer Book Society.

The church has an active adult education program, built around special programs at appropriate times – like Michaelmas, Candemas and Lent. It also sponsors several literary functions over the course of the year.

There are three choirs, with some but by no means complete overlap, led by a top music director. Many of the choir members also participate in an active concert program at the church. Some of the choir members sing professionally.

Up until the arrival of the new priest, the Parish Advisory Board had fallen into disuse, and had not met for several years. The Corporation made all of the decisions about Church administration. The Rector made all decisions concerning liturgy and worship. When the Rector became ill, and announced his retirement, an ad hoc committee was established, with the tacit support of the wardens and the interim priest, to develop and implement education and outreach programs, with a view to growing the Church. It was successful in the programs it undertook, many of them quite ambitious, and was entirely self-funding.

With the arrival of the new priest, expectation turned quickly to concern as he began to take control of parish organizations and functions; including outreach, education and advertising. The ad hoc committee was disbanded and several of its members were co-opted into a new advisory board.

The new priest is now firmly in control of all aspects of parish life, and is indeed invariably found at all functions and occasions on which the church is open. As a result, Parish lay leaders have stepped back and are waiting for the clergy to lead most, if not all initiatives. There are some signs of discord within the Corporation also as a very active and competent deputy warden – chair of the Financial Development Committee – stepped down after only three months in office, due to business pressures.

Within the established Guilds and organizations within the church there is starting to be some rumbling about changes the new priest is planning to make.

Although the church appears to be active, a close examination of the attendance at the many services and functions will evidence a very committed and loyal congregation. In many cases, there is considerable overlap in attendance among the functions. In addition, the Education events are primarily attended by the same hardcore group of about 30 members.

There has been little outreach done over the last several years, although at one time the Parish was very active in this regard. Until recently a small group of Parishioners volunteered one evening a month at the Out-of-the-Cold program run by a neighbouring parish. This year, for the first time, a Thanksgiving dinner was offered, at St. B's as outreach to those in need.

Analysis

St. B's would appear to meet Steinke's criteria as a troubled congregation. A long service Pastor has recently departed. Due to an illness in the final years of his service parish vision had been allowed to remain as it had been, without being revisited in any substantial way. The corporation believed that should properly be the job of the new pastor. They did not want to "tie his hands" by implementing a program with which he might not agree. As a result, formal lay leadership of the Parish was allowed to atrophy. The ad hoc committee that stepped into the breach was disgruntled to find that their services would be no longer required, although a few key players were mollified by being drafted onto the revitalized Advisory Board, which the new Priest chairs.

The Stewardship Campaign being run currently was implemented by the Corporation, which disregarded the input of the Financial Committee, which had done quite a bit of work preparing a financial stewardship campaign for the fall period. The Committee Chair, as mentioned above, found that work pressures required his resignation at the present time.

An attempt by several members of the congregation to address the issues of the Sunday School have pretty much been ignored. The time, it seems to discuss such issues is not yet. The current Sunday School is adequate for present requirements. It should be noted that the parents were not proposing to replace the current Sunday School Superintendent, but were attempting to work with her, and to establish a second Sunday School at a different time.

The adult education program was deferred for a period, due to other pressures and a desire to concentrate on the Stewardship program. As a result, the Coordinator is currently working with the Education program at a neighbouring church, which is billed as being jointly run with St. B's but which takes place entirely at the other Parish. The Coordinator is also now volunteering at the other Church's Out-of-the Cold program.

The above comments are somewhat sketchy in terms of a formal analysis; however, the writer does not have access to the inner workings of St. B's Advisory Board or Corporation, and can only relate the tale from the standpoint of a parishioner. It must also be said that it is "early days" yet to evaluate the performance of the new Rector. After all, he has only just completed one year of service. There have been some new faces appearing at the altar rail; and different members of the congregation are being asked to come forward and take over roles on various committees.

Yet there is a lingering concern that present Rector will be at St. B's for only a short period of time. He would appear to be very promotable, if not in this Diocese, then in another. In such circumstances his operating style – assuming strong, direct control of virtually all aspects of parish affairs – could be detrimental; particularly since a burgeoning lay leadership was sidetracked in the process; and several formerly active members have stepped back.

On the other hand, the new Rector may build a different, stronger team with new players. Some of the current parishioners may drift away, but that may be necessary for the church to change and move forward. It is just too early to tell at this juncture.

Would that change could occur where all parties could participate, and none need feel disempowered or dismayed.

Time will tell what will happen in this instance.

JB Bartley

Trinity 662030885